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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 TASHKENT 000022

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DEPT FOR SCA, DRL, AND G/TIP
G/TIP FOR MEGAN HALL

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TAGS: PHUM ECON ELAB KCRM KTIP KWMN PGOV PREL SOCI KZ RS UZ
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: TIP PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN CONTINUES;
CONVICTIONS REPORTED

REF: a) 08 TASHKENT 1380; 08 TASHKENT 987; 08 TASHKENT 1227

1. (U) Summary: In the past few months, the government has continued a wide-ranging public awareness campaign on trafficking-in-persons (TIP) in the government-controlled mass media (ref A and B). Conducting a relatively non-extensive survey, poloff uncovered more than 70 separate TIP-related stories which appeared on Uzbek television and in state-controlled newspapers and websites between approximately mid-September and the end of December. The stories, which were aimed at raising the awareness of Uzbek citizens about the dangers of trafficking-in-persons, reported convictions of alleged traffickers, efforts by government bodies to counter human trafficking and assist victims, and specific cases of individuals trafficked for both labor and sexual exploitations. Presumably, more stories ran in the state-controlled media that poloff did not stumble across. In addition, poloff has observed TIP advertisements on Uzbek television featuring emergency hotline numbers operated by independent anti-TIP NGOs and a prominently displayed billboard on TIP that has recently appeared in downtown Tashkent. The TIP public awareness campaign has been remarked upon by several observers and appears to have increased TIP awareness among Uzbek citizens. Considering the extreme reluctance of state-controlled media to run any stories that show Uzbekistan in a negative light, the government's TIP public awareness campaign is nothing less than extraordinary. End summary.

REPORTS ON RECENT TIP-RELATED CONVICTIONS

2. (U) Over the past several months, the state-controlled media reported that at least 12 alleged traffickers have been convicted and imprisoned for TIP-related offences. There was a noticeable increase in the number of convictions reported after the passage of criminal code amendments in September which strengthened penalties against traffickers. Some of the media reports did not provide full information about the cases, such as name of convicted traffickers or the length of their sentences. Presumably, there were additional reports of convictions in the local media that poloff did not see, as well as convictions that were not reported in the media.

3. (U) On December 23, the Uzbek National News Agency website reported that Nukus-resident Samandar Eshboyev was recently convicted of trafficking 13 individuals abroad for labor exploitation. The individuals reportedly had their passports seized and were forced to work at construction sites and live in poor conditions.

4. (U) On November 20, the state-controlled Russian-language Norodnoye Slovo newspaper, as well its Uzbek-language equivalent Khalq Sozi, reported that Nukus resident Nurlan Bakimbetov was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for trafficking Uzbek citizens to Kazakhstan for the purpose of labor exploitation. He was also ordered to pay 100,000 soums (73 dollars) in damages to each victim. Bakimbetov reportedly collaborated with a Kazakh accomplice, Dostom, to traffic 14 men to Kazakhstan. The article reported that the men were forced to work under poor conditions and hand their salaries over to Bakimbetov, who earned 2 million soums (1,500 dollars) from the scheme.

5. (U) On November 13, the state-controlled Kuch Aolatda newspaper TASHKENT 00000022 002 OF 006

reported that a court in Tashkent sentenced an unnamed resident of Surkhundarya province to six years' imprisonment for human trafficking.

6. (U) On October 9, the state-controlled Dyonat newspaper reported that Namangan resident Ayubkhon Narsriddinov was imprisoned for trafficking seven Namangan residents to Kazakhstan for the purpose of labor exploitation. The report does not mention the length of Narsriddinov's sentence. The individuals were reportedly forced to work for six months in Kazakhstan under poor conditions and without pay.

¶7. (U) On October 8, the Russian Regnum news agency reported that the Chilonzor district criminal court in Tashkent convicted Ilhom Yusupov and three female accomplices of trafficking 20 women from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan and sentenced them to between 10 to 14 years' imprisonment under criminal code article 135 (human trafficking). According to the article, the criminal group received 300,000 soums (230 dollars) from their Kazakhstani accomplices for each woman that was trafficked (ref C).

¶8. (U) The Russian news agency Regnum reported on September 19 that Ikrom Teshaboyev was sentenced by a court in Namangan province's Chortoq district to five years' imprisonment for human trafficking. Teshaboyev had reportedly lured Uzbek citizens to Russia with promises of finding work in Saint Petersburg that paid between 500 to 1,000 dollars a month. Instead, the victims were reportedly forced to work under poor conditions after Teshaboyev seized their passports and stole about 6,000 dollars in wages from them. The court also ruled that Teshaboyev should pay 7,840,000 soums (about 6,000 dollars) in damages to the victims. The article specifically noted that Teshaboyev had been convicted under the new criminal code amendments.

¶9. (U) On September 19, Uzbekistan's First Television Channel reported that two women from the Ferghana Valley were recently imprisoned for trafficking in persons. One of the women, Sanobar Abdullayeva from Ferghana City, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for trafficking two Uzbek women to Dubai for sexual exploitation. The other woman, Ziyoda Sotvoldiyeva from Kokand, was imprisoned for two years for trafficking Uzbek women abroad for sexual exploitation (the destination was not reported). The report also included interviews with three of the victims, whose identities were protected. The Ferghana City prosecutor, Bobur Dehqunov, also warned viewers not to fall victim to traffickers.

¶10. (U) On August 15, the Khalq Sozi newspaper reported that an unnamed resident of Shakhrihon district of Andijon province was convicted of human trafficking.

REPORTS ON TIP-RELATED TRIALS AND ARRESTS

¶11. (U) The state-controlled press also reported on TIP-related arrests and trials whose results are currently unknown. On December 16, the Narodnoye Slovo newspaper reported that criminal charges had been brought against "a number of people" for human trafficking in Khorezm province. The unnamed individuals were

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accused of trafficking men to Kazakhstan for labor exploitation and women to Kazakhstan and India for sexual exploitation.

¶12. (U) On December 2, the Khalq Sozi newspaper reported that Uzbek law enforcement had arrested "a group of three men and one woman" for trafficking two Uzbek women into Kazakhstan for sexual exploitation. The group was reportedly paid 30,000 Kazakh tenge (250 dollars) for each victim. Interestingly enough, the story appears to have been first reported by the independent Uznews.net website (operated by an exiled Uzbek independent journalist) on December 1. The Uznews.net article reported that one of the group, Batyr, identified victims, who were then taken on "first dates" to a local cafe in Tashkent by another accomplice, a 25-year old man named Faruh. There another accomplice, a 38-year old woman named Hurshida, drugged the victims by giving them soft drinks mixed with psychotropic agents. The gang then reportedly drove the victims to the border with Kazakhstan, where another accomplice named Ahmed brought them across the border and sold them to brothels in Kazakhstan (Note: The Kazakh border is only a 20-minute drive from downtown Tashkent. End note.) The article quoted MVD investigator Alisher Kamalov as stating that authorities had so far identified eight victims, but suspected more might have been trafficked. Kamalov also reported that the investigation was hampered by the unwillingness of victims to cooperate with the police, as they feared being condemned as prostitutes by friends and family and feared retaliation by the traffickers.

¶13. (U) On November 14, the Narodnoye Slovo newspaper reported that criminal cases have been recently launched against 19 suspected human traffickers in Surkhundarya province.

¶14. (U) On November 8, the state-controlled Jamiyat newspaper carried an article by Qahramon Kholmurodov, a judge from Jizzakh province, who reported that three individuals had recently been put on trial in his province for trafficking residents to Kazakhstan for the purpose of labor exploitation.

REPORTS ON GOVERNMENT ANTI-TIP EFFORTS

¶15. (U) Many of the TIP-related programs and articles in the state-controlled media reported on government efforts to combat TIP and raise awareness among ordinary Uzbeks about the dangers of being trafficked for both labor and sexual exploitation. Several of the articles reported on national and provincial level officials holding roundtables on combating trafficking, assisting victims, and conducting public awareness campaigns in all of Uzbekistan's provinces. Other articles focused on the specifics of individual TIP cases. Almost all of the articles and programs warned citizens about the dangers of becoming victims. Below is just a sample of

the more interesting articles.

¶16. (U) On December 25, the state-controlled Ozbekistan Ovozi newspaper reported that the national interagency commission to fight human trafficking recently held a meeting at the Ministry of Interior to discuss the efforts of provincial-level anti-TIP commissions in 2008. Under an anti-TIP National Action Plan adopted by the government in July, the interagency commission is required to meet at least quarterly to address trafficking issues and oversee implementation of national and regional activities to

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raise awareness, protect victims, and modify legislation.

¶17. (U) On December 20, Uzbek Television First Channel broadcasted a program about a former police major from Bukhara province, Furgat Kamoliddinov, who allegedly trafficked 28 persons from his region to Russia for labor exploitation. The program also showed street billboards and posters at airports warning about human trafficking, and also explained procedures about how citizens can find legal employment abroad.

¶18. (U) On December 4, the state-controlled XXI Asr newspaper reported that Bahodir Yangiboyev, the head of the anti-TIP commission in Uzbekistan's Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, reported that human trafficking was on the rise in Karakalpakstan, noting an increase in the number of TIP-related criminal cases in 2008. Yangiboyev also criticized the performance of police on the issue. On September 10, Tashkent's state-controlled Kuch Adolatda newspaper also reported that the number of human trafficking cases in Uzbekistan was increasing. The articles are particularly interesting as state-controlled newspapers almost never report negative information about Uzbekistan.

¶19. (U) On November 26, the state-controlled Mahalla newspaper reported that officials conducted a TIP-related public awareness campaign in Khorezm province, which involved law enforcement officials visiting mahallas (neighborhoods), education establishments, private companies and public organizations to warn locals about the dangers of TIP.

¶20. (U) On November 14, the Jamiyat newspaper carried an interview with Foreign Labor Migration Agency head Gafurjon Usmonov, who warned readers about falling victim to human traffickers and explained how his agency could assist Uzbeks find legal employment abroad, including in South Korea, Russia, and Poland.

¶21. (U) On November 13, the state-controlled Narodnoye Slovo newspaper reported that the Prosecutor General's Office, the Women's Committee, the national association of NGOs, and UNDP held a seminar in Tashkent to discuss the role of NGOs in fighting human trafficking and assisting victims.

¶22. (U) On September 29, the Jahon news agency reported that the National Academic Drama Theater of Uzbekistan in Tashkent staged a play entitled "Bitter Repentance," which focused on the plight of TIP victims. The play was written by two local playwrights, T. Makhmudov and D. Makhmudova, who were assisted by the Tashkent City Prosecutor's office and the Tashkent City Criminal Court.

TIP-RELATED TV ADVERTISEMENTS AND BILLBOARDS

¶23. (U) Poloff also has observed TIP-related commercials on Uzbek television. While waiting for a long-delayed flight at the Nukus airport in Karakalpakstan in November, poloff saw TIP-related commercials repeatedly aired on Uzbek television during commercial breaks. The advertisements warned viewers about the dangers of

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becoming victims of trafficking for both sexual and labor exploitation and displayed emergency hotline numbers in every province operated by IOM's partner NGOs. The showing of the commercials in Karakalpakstan is especially noteworthy, as the region is Uzbekistan's poorest and is where many of the country's TIP victims originate. Regular flights also leave directly from Nukus to Moscow, which presumably include some TIP victims.

¶24. (U) While driving recently along Navoi street, one of Tashkent's biggest thoroughfares, poloff noticed a rather large billboard warning local residents about TIP that had been recently erected. Previously, Emboffs also have noted TIP-related posters at the Tashkent airport and other locations in the city.

PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN APPEARS TO BE EFFECTIVE

¶25. (U) Several international observers working on human rights issues in Uzbekistan have noticed and remarked upon the government's anti-TIP campaign to poloff over the past few months. For example, UNDP Deputy Director Kyoko Postil remarked that she had never seen the government engage in such a wide-ranging human rights-related campaign before and speculated that local

journalists must have been given free reign to report on the issue, which they do not enjoy on nearly any other human rights issue (though the press this fall also appears to have more freedom to write on child labor as well). European diplomats have commented that they wish they could see the same level of engagement the government has displayed on TIP on other human rights-related issues.

¶26. (U) The government's public awareness campaign appears to be effective in raising the awareness of ordinary Uzbek citizens about the dangers of TIP. Several ordinary Uzbeks have commented on the campaign to poloff and have demonstrated a thorough grasp of the issue. The somewhat awkward Russian-language term used for human trafficking, "torgovli ludmi" (literally "trade in people"), which, when previously used by poloff, used to elicit blank stares from many Uzbeks, appears to have more thoroughly penetrated the local lexicon this year. Local human rights activists also have taken note of the campaign, and there has been a marked increase in their reporting on TIP, an issue which they had largely ignored before this year.

COMMENT

¶27. (U) Considering the extreme reluctance of state-controlled media to run stories that show Uzbekistan in anything less than an absolutely glowing light, the government's recent TIP public awareness campaign, which has included articles admitting that human trafficking is a growing problem in Uzbekistan and noting official shortcomings, is nothing less than extraordinary. Especially noteworthy is the sheer number and variety of media outlets involved, including Uzbek television and state-controlled websites, and newspapers in every province of Uzbekistan. The articles also demonstrate an increase in the number of TIP-related convictions since the adoption of new criminal code amendments in September and describe other anti-TIP efforts undertaken by the

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government, some of which, such as the play conducted by the National Academic Drama Theater of Uzbekistan, are truly quite inventive. The public awareness campaign already appears to have had some impact on raising the awareness of Uzbek citizens about the dangers of TIP and how to avoid becoming victims, which hopefully will result in their increased vigilance and a decrease in the number of TIP cases in the future. As noted by other foreign diplomats, if only we could get the government to engage so thoroughly on other human rights-related issues as it has on TIP, we would be well on our way to improving human rights in the country. Nevertheless, most Uzbeks who become TIP victims are seeking better economic prospects abroad, and until economic conditions improve, especially in the country's more remote rural regions like Karakalpakstan and Surkhundarya province, TIP is likely to remain an issue in Uzbekistan.

NORLAND

To view the entire SMART message, go to URL http://repository.state.sgov.gov/_layouts/OSS_SearchResults.aspx?k=messageid:4edfbc06-278d-424c-a0